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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-122211>
Journal Article

Originally published at:
Schulz, Mascha (2013). Migrating Men – Mobile Women? – How women cope with male seasonal migration in Bangladesh. *Südasien-Chronik*, 3:183-213.



Migrating Men – Mobile Women? How women cope with male seasonal migration in Bangladesh

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Migration is often associated with social change. Thus, Katy Gardner and Filippo Osella write in their introductory article on migration in South Asia:

Even if this is not the intended effect, the exposure to new places, ideas and practices which migrants experience often seems to lead to a questioning of existing forms of hierarchy or a reinvention of the self's place within the social order. (2003: xiv)

In this context migration is also commonly considered a modern phenomenon that emerged relatively recently. This claim to newness in academic debate is typically found in literature on globalisation, while others have emphasised that migration is in fact a very long-standing phenomenon, especially in South Asia (De Haan 1994).

In rural areas of Bangladesh seasonal migration is also a common practice that is neither new (Faraizi 1993: 67; Mahbub 1986) nor, as I will argue in this article, necessarily leads to ruptures from the social structure. The changes that occur in the context of gendered migration in rural Bangladesh will be interpreted as a situated change that should not be conflated with historical transformations of social structures or gender roles. Difference in behaviour is therefore understood as being related to the variation of circumstance similar to James Fergusons concept "cultivated styles" (1999: 86).

It is predominantly men who migrate seasonally to work in other areas of the country and wives mostly stay in the village during these times. Considering gender norms in Bangladesh, which suggest a clear division of labour as well as a spatial segregation between men and women (such as the market place as a male space and the place in front of the house as a female space), it is surprising that a high proportion



of women remain alone in the village for some weeks or even months every year in Bangladesh.

There are several questions that are provoked by this phenomenon: How does seasonal outmigration of men impact on the status of women and gender roles, such as the gendered divisions of labour? Are measurements taken to prevent alteration of roles or increased spatial mobility of the women? To what extent are gender roles renegotiated after the migrant's return? What are the perspectives and interpretations of the women concerning the migration of men and their changed situation? How are these processes evaluated by the village community and which strategies are applied to legitimise lack of conformity to gender roles? And finally, in what way do the interpretations and practices of the women relate to their socio-economic position?

In 2011, I conducted qualitative research in Northern Bangladesh to explore these questions. This paper aims to describe the predominantly male temporal migration and its effects on women and their perspectives. It thereby explores the dynamics of transformation of social structures in the context of migration. Focusing on spatial mobility, I will present selected data and situations of my study that allow us to explore certain aspects in relation to previous discussions about spatial mobility and socio-economic change. In doing so, I aim to gain a better understanding of the relationship between seasonal migration and gender norms and thus contribute to the broader debate about social change and migration.

As the discussion about gender and the role of women is highly politicised and contested, first I would like to outline the context of this study by shedding light on transnational, national and local power dimensions in the discourse on women in Bangladesh. I will then summarise the basic theories of gender construction in Bangladesh with regard to the existing anthropological literature. Special attention will be given to Santi Rozario's theoretical framework, which allows us to analyse spatial mobility of women in relation to class and status and to consider discourses or cultural ideals as distinct from but interdependent of social practices. After a short description of the research site, I will concentrate on practices and discourses concerning the bazar¹ (market place) as a gendered space and summarise in which ways these practices change during the temporal absence of husbands. Following this, I will explore public debates and positions concerning the spatial mobility of women and thereby consider aspects such as class, status and the 'Islamic' concept of gender separation termed, in Bangladesh, *porda*.² Before I



discuss my research findings in relation to the theoretical framework of Rozario and answer the research questions stated above, I will shortly explore narratives of “being unprotected” that on the one side point towards risks women face given male out-migration and on the other side show that the women do not consider the situational changes as a chance for transformation of social structures but instead as an unavoidable and temporary solution. This discussion will reflect back on the main argument that the situational change in social practices in the context of migration does not necessarily lead to a questioning of gender roles or transformation of social structures.

1. Discourse on women in Bangladesh: Between global power asymmetries and national identity

In anthropology it is widely acknowledged that academic discourse cannot be separated from its political and historical context, but involves power and thereby has implications for social and political processes. Therefore a highly contested issue such as gender in Bangladesh has to be contextualised with regard to power inequalities, colonising discourses and hegemonic epistemologies.

Following the criticism of Edward Said (2001) it can be assumed that the contemporary debate about gender has its legacy in the colonial period. Postcolonial scholars have argued that contemporary discussions can be interpreted as a continuation of the (feminist) discourse on the status of women in the Indian society in the 19th century, which legitimised the British colonial rule as a “civilizing mission” (Shehabuddin 2008: 35). For example Sarah White writes: “concern with the ‘status of women’ in Indian society was used to assert British superiority and justify colonialism [...] whereby (Western) ‘we’ are contrasted with (Indian) ‘them’, and the difference is expressed in moral terms” (1992: 2f, insertion in original). According to White the colonial legacy is not only observable in the continuing economic dependencies, but also in the normative power and monopoly over interpretation still assumed by the hegemonic centre:

[D]iscussion of gender can serve as an index to other relations of dominance. Over gender issues, the Western³ aid community is openly critical of Bangladeshi society, and is deliberately aiming



not only to raise economic standards of living, but also to change basic social relationships. (1992: 13)

The influence of 'Western' donors can be observed in the national policy papers which, since the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985), appear to be highly influenced by international guidelines concerning gender mainstreaming and women-in-development-strategies (Naher 2005: 24-27). Similarly the "poor rural women" are increasingly targeted by NGOs of the development sector as "women's empowerment" became an appealing slogan. Projects and papers often seem to be influenced by ideas of universal feminism that assume the integration of women in the labour market as the first step towards emancipation, gender equality and resolution of patriarchy.⁴ Cultural differences are interpreted from this modernisation theorist's perspective as a hindrance to unilinear progress and the change of women's social practices is taken as an indicator of development (Shehabuddin 2008: 42 or for an illustrating example Chauhan 1986).

This influence of 'Western' development aid donors is mirrored in the scholarly discourse on women in Bangladesh. While there are growing numbers of books titled something like "Empowerment of Rural Women in Bangladesh", one encounters difficulties when searching for analytically rich works on gender relations. Women are often reduced to 'key indicators' which can serve as the basis of comparison" (White 1992: 17). The representation of the "poor, exploited women" in the literature tends to depict Bangladeshi women as a mass of passive victims in the need of intervention without considering emic perspectives, their heterogeneity and agency. It has been pointed out that representation of Bangladeshi women by 'Western' feminist scholars or 'Third World' activists are not necessarily in the interest of or from the perspective of these women, but often serve other purposes (Kabeer 2001: 15; cf. Inden 2000). Concerning this Aihwa Ong writes: "By portraying women in non-Western societies as identical and interchangeable, and more exploited than women in dominant capitalist societies, liberal and socialist feminism alike encode a belief in their own cultural superiority" (1988: 85).

However, it would be wrong to over-emphasise the impact of colonial and post-colonial power asymmetries and in this way ascribe the role of the main actor to the 'West'. One would not just reduce global complexities to a Bangladesh-'West'-dichotomy, ignore



other transnational processes and actors (e.g. Saudi Arabia), risk overestimating the scope of 'Western' influence, but also miss forms of resistance as well as transformation and renegotiation. For example the fact that the Bangladeshi government includes certain women's issues in their policy papers because of international guidelines and pressure, must not be seen as unreserved adoption, but can also be interpreted as a strategic tool "[to] gain access to funds and/or social and political recognition" (White 1992: 15).

Even more importantly, one would completely ignore the enormous role, which the gender-debate plays in negotiating national and religious identities. Debates about gender in Bangladesh are intertwined with the contested construction of the national identity as either religiously-based with emphasis on Islam or regionally-based with emphasis on formal secularism⁵ and a shared language and culture (cf. Uddin 2006; Ahamed & Nazneen 1990). That gender is a highly contested topic can be seen in the number of fatwas (Islamic legal pronouncement) that concern gender norms as well as attacks against women who were engaged in NGOs activities in the 1990s by so-called fundamentalists (Islam 2011: 32-36). Ainoon Naher has shown that it is important to consider power relations on a local and national level as well as their historical dimension to properly conceive the different positions regarding gender norms in Bangladesh (2005: 140-145).⁶

Since colonial times, claims for or against social change have been made by social movements,⁷ which were often formed along religious divisions (Murshid 1983). While most colonial debates focused on Hindu women, Muslim women became a political issue especially within the context of the language movements and emerging Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan. Gender norms were not questioned in general, but contested along political camps as, for example, many women expressed with their clothing their identity as Bengali women and thereby distanced themselves from symbols of Islamic identity. This symbolic dimension of women's clothes remains powerful until today and it can be argued that in independent Bangladesh the behaviour and appearance of women serves as an indicator for political positions and as a "boundary marker" (Rozario 1992: 160) for religious or political groups. Elora Shahebuddin writes: "interest in women's issue today is not simply to achieve equality for women but also to promote a certain image of society" (2008: 74).

By considering the context in which debates on gender in Bangladesh are situated, it should be clear that these are not only problems of



representation. In fact, statements concerning gender have to be analysed as speech acts (cf. Austin 2002) and are strategic positions in an ongoing discourse and power struggle. White argues:

Statements need to be read not only for their substance, but also for the ways they express struggles for power in Bangladesh, between the state and different groups in society, and between self-determination and domination from outside. (1992: 12)

2. Relationality of gender

Gender as a socio-cultural construction is never static. Related identities, relations and ideologies are subject to continuous performative reproduction, change and negotiation. Socialisation and a biologised view on gender support the assumption of gender differences as natural and disregard power dimensions (cf. Mahler & Pesser 2001; Bourdieu 2005). Likewise, gender has to be viewed in relation to other identities and the person's position in „social space“ (Bourdieu 1985). In this way gender norms and role expectations for women in Bangladesh are not static, but differ according to age, position in the family, number and gender of the children, class, ethnic and religious identity, *gushti* (lineage), place and time.

In the academic literature on gender in Bangladesh, the topic that has been discussed most explicitly is the connection between gender and class. Sarah White (1992), for example, has illustrated that different forms of observing *porda* are related to material resources. The fact that it is rather poor and marginalised women who enjoy relative freedom in their spatial mobility, access to own income, etc. stands in contrast to the assumption of the development discourse, which suggest that bringing women in public space is a precondition to advance their status and 'development' (see above). In addition, the dynamics of social mobility in Bangladesh are gendered. In this context Mead Cain, Syeda Khanam and Shamsun Nahar (1979) have coined the term "patriarchal risk" to describe the much higher probability for women to experience social and economic decline and marginalisation. They argue that the norms assume that men care for their wives, which has fatal implications for those women who have no man they can rely on.⁸ Therefore, social networks and the existence and support of sons are essential for their



socio-economic security (cf. Cain 1978).⁹ In this context White argues that gender inequality in Bangladesh is mediated by unequal access to markets (labour, livestock, land, credit, etc.) and results in the fact that “female-headed households figure disproportionately among the poor” (1992: 47).

Further, the construction of gender and gender roles cannot be separated from the construction of sexuality, kinship, as well as self and group membership that are expressed in Bengali terms such as *ghor*, *bari*, *poribar*, *jati*, *chula*, *khana*, *attiyo*, *shomaj*, etc.¹⁰ *Gushti* for example includes all those relatives that share the same male ancestor and genealogical status or *ijjat* (honour). A woman is normally ‘imported’ in the *gushti* and perceived as a risk insofar as her behaviour will have an impact on the status and reputation of the whole group. Therefore, her behaviour will be observed, evaluated and regulated from different actors and conformation to *gushti*-specific norms is expected (cf. Kotalová 1993; Rozario 1992: 45). Compared to a *nuton bou* (new bride), who has not given birth yet, the spatial mobility of mothers is much less restricted. Control and surveillance by relatives and neighbours decline with increasing age (*ibid.*).

Between different ethnic or religious groups, such as *adivasi* (indigenous), Hindus or Muslims one can find various differences concerning gender norms that are manifest in group specific family laws and inheritance rules. This is also connected to the concept of *jati* (lit. colour, race, kin), which implies that there are substantially different humans to whom different codices of behaviour (*dhormo*) apply (Inden & Nicholas 1977: 17-20). Moreover, there are regional differences. While the North-Western parts, where my research took place, are known for a relatively high spatial mobility of women, in other areas like Chittagong the observation of *porda* is watched more closely, less women are observable in the public sphere and wear a *burka* (full body cloak) more often (cf. Paul 1992).

In addition, gender norms, spatial mobility of women and their increased participation in wage labour have to be contextualised in relation to changes of the socio-economic situation. Sinking real wages, increased landlessness and a tendency towards nuclear families are some factors that lead to an increased number of women without the support of male relatives. Various authors have argued that the change to a more monetary based and diversified economy has devalued the



labour of women (on land and at home) and interpret the shift from a bride price (pon) to dowry (dabi, joutuk) as a consequence of this devaluation (c.f. Rozario 1992: 131-150).¹¹ In face of these economic developments and their gendered implications more and more women search for income opportunities, which in turn have effects on the labour market. Although women have never been totally excluded from the labour market (cf. Sen 1999; Engels 1996 for a historical perspective), the patterns and possibilities have changed. In the literature, the feminisation of labour in the garment sector in the 1980s, which offered a broader group of women the chance to make a considerable and independent income for the first time, has been highlighted (cf. Kabeer 2001; Feldman 2001; Kibria 1995). Nowadays educated women are employed by NGOs and the public sector (especially as teachers), while poor women work in the field, work-for-food-programs or households of others. While wage labour in the 1970s was only possible with the cost of social degradation and mostly limited to widows (Feldman & McCarthy 1983), this marginalising effect is not present in the same degree today.

3. Restriction of spatial mobility and control of female sexuality: The interpretive framework of Shanti Rozario

It has often been argued that the restriction of spatial mobility of women is caused by a desire to control female sexuality (cf. Rozario 1992; Inden & Nicholas 1977). A particularly stimulating theoretical framework has been offered by Santi Rozario. In her monograph *Purity and Communal Boundaries* (1992) she reflects upon the status of "women and gender ideologies" in the context of socio-economic change and ethnic conflict. With regard to this, she interprets the control of female sexuality by restrictions of spatial mobility as "symbolic capital", in Bourdieu's (2009: 335-377) sense of the term, which is utilized by hegemonic groups to reassure or enhance their position.

Rozario describes that – in her research area Doria as well as in other regions in Bangladesh – more and more women are forced to work outside their house due to socio-economic changes. She argues that this leads to an increased mobility and presence of women in public space while at the same time gender ideologies remain intact. Differing from previous arguments she writes that this discrepancy between ideology and social



practice was not a result of an incompatibility of traditional values with a modernising economy, but rather can be attributed to dimensions of power and domination (1992: 128-130). In this context an analytical distinction between culture and social practice as suggested by Clifford Geertz (1987) is necessary as the mutual independence of these aspects allows the preservation of gender ideals and their powerful use as symbolic capital despite the fact that strict forms of porda cannot be followed by most community members due to material circumstance.

For Rozario (1992: 7), culture is equated with a system of values and meanings in which concepts of purity/impurity, honour, shame and porda deserve special attention in relation to "gender". Honour (*ijjat*) is especially associated with men, while having shame (*lojja*) is considered a virtue for women (*ibid.*: 85). Although statements about a sense of shame often involve connotations of sexual purity and modesty, they mostly do not refer directly to sexuality, but rather "an impression of her sexual status is often formed from her day-to-day behavior" (*ibid.*). Accordingly any kind of "misbehavior" can lead to a questioning of the sexual purity of a woman and has adverse effects not only on the woman, but also on her whole family (*poribar*) and *gushti*. Therefore, the woman, whose status depends on the voluntary conformity to gender norms, is largely responsible for the honour of the husband and his patrilinear family (*ibid.*: 86).

The need to restrict female sexuality is thus derived from concepts of sexuality. While sexual desire is generally acknowledged, it is considered necessary to control female sexuality to limit the disruptive power of women and prevent the related danger of polluting men. Rozario writes:

Women are seen to be motivated by one sole object – sex. Faithfulness and virtue are therefore not natural for omnisexual women; in the light of such portrayal men needed to immobilize women, lock them up, hide them and spate them from unrelated man. (*ibid.*: 91)

Porda is as much a result of as a force for the ideology of sexual purity. Although porda is primarily associated with Islam, Rozario argues that it also applies to other religious groups. For her, porda means:

[K]eeping women confined within the home and covering them in veils whenever they venture out of home. In a wider context



parda [sic] refers to women's modesty and restrictions on their interaction with males. (ibid.: 88)

The 'ideology of purity' is not interpreted as primarily religious, but as a form of symbolic capital which both depends upon and results in (socio-)economic capabilities:

[F]amilies and lineages which can maintain their status and honour in turn use their symbolic capital to enhance their material position, and vice versa [...] However, because poor families cannot afford to maintain their honour by confining their women at home or by displaying wealth in the form of feasts, purity and honour work essentially to the advantage of the rich. (Rozario: 1992:7)

For example, the symbolic capital that is accumulated by restricting female spatial mobility can be converted into economic capital by forming suitable marriage alliances, which result in political and economical advantages (ibid.: 7-13). Thus insufficient conformity with regard to gender norms and parda is possible, but results in status decline and social as well as economic degradation.

4. Description of the research field and its inhabitants

My research took place from mid-September until the end of November 2011 in Shundorpur¹² in the north of Nilphamari. Shundorpur is, as other villages in Bangladesh (cf. Blanchet 1987), not a clearly bounded unit, but segmented by various para (village quarters) and conglomerations of houses. Administrative borders are not reflected in the sensation of the villagers as the settlement merges fluidly into the next village. The market place (bazar or hat) along the paved road is a local centre where the most public and commercial facilities such as shops, a mosque or the mill are placed.

Although the bazar offers a few alternative employment opportunities, agriculture remains for most of the villagers the primary source of income, either as a landowner, peasant, tenant (share-cropping) or day labourer.¹³ As a result of the agrarian cycle the work-load is unequally distributed around the year. Especially from mid-September to mid-



November (Bengal months ashshin and kartik, before the amon-harvest) and from mid-March to mid-April (before the boro-harvest) one can find a high rate of un- and underemployment. Particularly for day labourers and peasants it is a difficult time as employment opportunities are not available, and investment in fertilizers, irrigation etc. is needed. As the rice stock is declining, prices are rising, which often lead to seasonal food insecurity that is known as *monga*. Besides seeking loans and a diversification of income sources the temporal migration for work is a strategy to cope with that situation (cf. Zug 2006; Shonchoya 2011).¹⁴

The village population is nearly exclusively constituted by Muslims. Having about 1300 houses and more than 6000 inhabitants, it was impossible to get well acquainted with all parts. Therefore, for my research I concentrated on a small neighbourhood with 61 houses, Gobeshonarpara that has a large proportion of migrating men. I spent most of my time there, conducting interviews, etc., while after the initial introduction period I visited other parts of the village only occasionally.

Gobeshonarpara is located about 1-1.5 km away from the bazar and about the same distance from the bazar of another village. The only public facility in this para is a primary school and an Eid square that is used for religious festivals. This part is relatively new, the first settlers came about 30 years ago. One cannot find rich or long-established families, and living there is not considered to be very prestigious. People settle mainly in nuclear families with one to seven members, but often close to other relatives (with the exception of Choibul and Mosheda). Three widows and an old couple are without their own income and supported by their sons, daughters-in-law and partially by governmental grants. Out of the 61 households, eleven had single women (nine widowed and two divorced women), one household was constituted only by an unmarried student and two men have been left by their wives.

Concerning class, the quarter is more homogenous than the village as a whole. Although no family can be considered as rich or well off, income and property ownership varies. Despite difficulties to evaluate the economic situation of the different families, they can be roughly classified. First, there are two families with a relatively high income as they have about 10-12 bigha (about one third of an acre) of land or earn considerable profit from the trade of rice. One family with four households has a good standard of living and high level of education. Another two households have a relatively large amount of land, 6-8 bigha. Twelve households have about 3-5 bigha and another eight



houses own small pieces of 2-3 bigha. The 13 households with less than 2 bigha can be considered as quasi-landless; while an additional 23 households do not own any agricultural land.¹⁵

Most households have different sources of income such as work on their own or tenanted land, from livestock, work as day labourers, employment at the bazar, rice trading, governmental grants, the selling of products such as blankets made of old saris or cow dung, or work in other households. Working relationships are often embedded in long-lasting asymmetric social or kinship relations that include various responsibilities and privileges such as access to certain spaces, credits and support in cases of emergency, presents at the time of marriage, or unpaid labour by one's children or wife. Therefore an exact calculation is not possible and also varies enormously according to the season. Lack of capital and liquidity is a problem and many households are indebted. Reasons for larger credits are the payment of dowry, the marriage of one's daughter(s), illnesses, or investment in agriculture or trade.

Men are regarded as wage earners and the role of the supplier is ascribed to them. In reality however, tasks cannot be easily ascribed to men or women as most tasks are carried out in a complex and complementary division of labour. For example it is considered a women's task to graze the cattle, but it is the men who cut grass or wash the cattle. Working on the field is also considered as men's job, but there are some tasks for which preferably women are employed (e.g. weeding, composting, transplantation of jute or chilli). While men plough and sow seeds for rice cultivation, it is mostly the women who process the dhan (paddy) to cal (uncooked rice). The actual harvest (cutting, collection and transportation) is predominantly considered a man's task, but is also done by women. Employment opportunities for women in the field are only available during certain periods and payment tends to be much less (up to 50%) compared to men. Jobs in households of wealthier families are often offered only to widows and older women.

For many families that have no or very limited land it is hardly possible to make a sufficient living in the village. Therefore, the decision to migrate to other areas to earn money is considered an economic necessity. For many men it is a chance to fulfil (at least partly) their role as wage earners and pay off a part of their debts, while others require money to invest in agriculture. They migrate toward different rural areas in Bangladesh, where an additional labour demand occurs



during harvest-time (mid-November to mid-December for amon-rice, April and May for boro-rice). The employment possibilities in other areas not only offer higher wages, but also ensure employment for several days and the wage is often paid in total upon completion of the work period. Some men also travel to Dhaka or other urban centres to work there as rickshaw drivers or in the construction sector.

5. Not at all “invisible”: Spatial mobility and the bazar as gendered space

In her introduction Jitka Kotalová writes about women in Bangladesh “half of its population [...] is defined by their absence” and speaks of an “invisibility of women in public sphere” (1993: 15). This quotation is at odds with the observations I made during my research. Although same spaces (as e.g. a hat, weekly market, or bazar, market place,) are clearly dominated by males, women also appear in this male space. White argues rightly that it is “simply not true that Bangladeshi women do not go out but rather notions of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ are open to complex manipulation” (1992: 78). Spaces in Bangladesh tend to be gendered without having a strict separation between men and women, but rather in the way that the movements and behaviour is restricted in certain ways and geared to gender-specific social expectations. Tanusree Paul has described that similarly for Bengali women in Kolkata:

[T]heir presence in the public, that is the man’s terrain, [...] is conjectured to entail dishonour and shame as well as ‘questioning of sexual virtues’ (Phadke 2007b: 1511). [...] This leads to adoption of certain precautionary steps [...] routes chosen and places preferred by them, though often mistaken as their autonomous choice, are actually governed by the dual process of fear and notions of social legitimacy. (2011: 251)

In the following, I will describe in which ways women in Shundorpur use male dominated spaces,¹⁶ how they negotiate such spaces and to which extent they avoid them. For men of Shundorpur the bazar is a place where they spend much time. On my regular commute to Gobeshonarpara I frequently met men on the daily route to the market where they do their shopping. For many men the market is a workplace,



where they sell products, let dhan be processed to cal by the mill, drive a van or sell their labour. Especially in the evenings the market is a place where men just spend time, hang around, drink tea, smoke and meet people for adda (chat).¹⁷ Others (White 1992: 78-88) have pointed to the fact that the bazar is an important space for politics and the creation of socio-economic alliances. In this way the hat is a great opportunity to find a future groom or bride for one's children, sell or buy land and strengthen political alliances.¹⁸ News is exchanged and important information is transmitted.

Women on the other hand tend to avoid the market. Regarding my presence I often heard statements such as "you came from far away, but we [women] are afraid to go to the next market" (Hasina, 2011/10/4 a.r.).¹⁹ However, only few women have never entered the market place. The government or NGOs are also encouraging this by measurements such as financial grants that mothers (but not fathers) can collect only in the market place in case the family has a low income and school-going children. Many women also go to the market to buy shoes, cloths or medicine. Many women asked me whether they could join me "as they are too shy to go alone". Whenever the women of Gobeshonarpara go to the market, it seems to be a special event. They take a bath, put oil on their hair, tie it together tidily and wrap their sari carefully around their body. Mostly, they are accompanied by other women or their children. While men "hang out" and spend time in the market, women go mainly for short and earmarked visits. In various small gestures and differences in the posture – such as a lowered head, avoidance of eye contact or hunched shoulders – the distinction between men and women can be observed (as other kinds of hierarchies in interactions in Bangladesh as well). In this context one could speak of a distinct habitus²⁰ for men and women (cf. Bourdieu 2009). On the way women would be eager to give reasons for their trip to the market such as an illness of their children, as if they had to legitimise it. Especially on hat-days when many men of other villages are present, women would avoid the market place and would always be back at home before dusk.

How far it is generally possible for a woman to use this male dominated space depends on the woman or rather her family. Some consider it as a given and normal not to go to the market: "Why should I go to the market? I do have a husband who cares for me and brings me everything we need" (Renu, 2011/10/20 a.r.). Others reflect on it as a social norm or restriction imposed from outside: "My wife does not go to the market.



Otherwise people would speak badly and gossip" (Aminul, 2011/10/23 a.r.) or "My husband does not allow me to go to the market (jaowa dey na). If I went nevertheless, he would beat me" (Hasina, 2011/11/15 a.r.). Situational positioning can also be observed in these statements, so that the explanation for avoiding the market might differ according to the surrounding audience. Frequently, the women present the fact that they avoid the market as their independent choice or give fear as a reason. Even women who visit the market during the absence of their husband (e.g. Rabbina) report on this fear. Asked about the reasons for such a fear, Rabbina does not give concrete answers, but says, "Can we women go to the market on our own? No, we are afraid (bhoy lage) and get lost" (Rabbina, 2011/11/4, a.r.). Even after repetitive questioning, her answers are not more concrete, but lead one to suspect fears of confrontations with or harassment by men and denunciation of her behaviour. Hence, markets are "place[s] of fear, where they anticipate trouble which may be a byproduct of their past experiences or of secondary information" (Paul 2011: 251). Simultaneously this open avowal of their anxiousness can be interpreted as socially anticipated behaviour and reflection of general notions of femininity and the need of protection by males.

6. Absence of men and different spatial movements of women

It is easy to avoid attendance at the market place during the presence of the husband, but how is their situation during his absence? Who is doing the daily shopping and who can arrange any necessities for the woman? Obviously the response to that situation varies from family to family and depends not only on personal characteristics, but also on the possibilities for support by the extended family. It can be argued that there are approximately three categories of women: Those for whom other men perform certain duties in place of the husband; those who seek out alternatives; and those who go on their own to the market during the absence of their spouse.

In case another man performs certain duties in place of the husband, it is mostly a close relative like a father-in-law, brother or brother-in-law. This is the case for e.g. Shilpi, Mina, Shamoli, Shirin, Aklina and Nargis. From their daily visit of the market the male relatives bring necessities and will also be available in case of emergency. This is possible for the



above-mentioned women not only because they live close enough to male relatives who stay behind in the village, but also because they have generally good relationships with them.

There are also women who try to avoid going to the market, but have no male relatives that they can rely on as e.g. Mojida and Golapi. Often both husbands (who are brothers) migrate at the same time, and therefore, the women have to seek out alternatives, e.g. the ten-year-old daughter of Mojida does the purchasing of daily food items every afternoon after school. The women do not consider it as unproblematic if children, especially girls, have to perform this role, as they are often cheated and do not get reasonable prices in the market. Although they can do the shopping, children, like women themselves, have only very limited access to other important markets at the bazar, such as livestock or credit. Some women also have their neighbours or mothers-in-law to bring them what they need or buy from the slightly more expensive mobile sellers who come to them. An alternative for some is also to go back to their fathers' home (baper bari). This is an option especially during the first years after marriage (e.g. Bulbuli, Rina, Shilpi).

In the third category, i.e. women who go on their own to the bazar, are Rabbina, Nurbanu, Shoripa, Merina, Doskina, Aisha and Meleka. In contrast to their men, they do not go every day, but buy in bulk and use the possibilities mentioned above on other days. Economic disadvantages are incurred e.g. as the women are not familiar with the sellers, and therefore, often have to pay higher prices. All of the women in this category have their own income from daily labour at least during the absence of their husbands. It should be noted that Nurbanu, Shoripa, Merina and Doskina are all relatives and it seems that their occasional presence on the market is in consensus with the whole family.

Above I have noted that gendered space in Bangladesh should be understood as space that is marked by very different habitus for men and women, rather than a strict spatial segregation. On this basis, I argue that this situational change and the increased spatial mobility of some women results not in a fundamental social change, or in a general questioning of roles, and therefore, should not even be considered as a real rupture in the social practice. It is the distinction in the habitus that confirms the categorical separation between men and women. Through the manner in which women act in public space, the dominance of men in this space is acknowledged (in the sense that Bourdieu calls



“paradoxe Unterwerfung” in 2005: 8).

Likewise, the female habitus is reconfirmed in the manner in which women, who visit the market during their husband’s absence, describe and conceptualise their situation. In general going to the market is regarded as undesirable and the women themselves see it as legitimate only as long as their husband cannot fulfil that role. Although a few women seem to enjoy roaming through the market in groups and also acknowledge the advantages, most of them assume the situation as undesirable, determined by economic imperatives and temporary.

My argument here is very similar to a thesis by James Ferguson. Researching on miners in the Zambian copper belt he points to the fact that commuting between two social fields leads to situational change with distinct “cultural styles” in the respective contexts that should not be conflated with historical changes within one social field (1999).

7. Competing evaluation standards in public debates

Undoubtedly, the ways in which spatial mobility of women is assessed and evaluated morally by others and the positioning of the women themselves show that their behaviour needs to be legitimised. However, at the same time there is no monolithic discourse, but competing perspectives and evaluation standards are observable. Considering the wide range of positions, it can be said that spatial mobility is not categorically condemned, and the strong association between porda and spatial segregation, which is frequently taken for granted in the literature, does not appear in the statements and definitions of the people of Shundorpur. Asked about the meaning of porda women often answered, “porda means clothing. Porda is how I cloth when I leave my house” (Aisha, 2011/11/21 a.r.). Although elaborations of the term often involve connotations about securing sexual purity and reluctance, aspects of the space hardly appear in the context of defining porda. Nevertheless, we find moral condemnation concerning the spatial mobility of women:

Mojida and Golapi have earned their money during the last days working on the field. I asked what they are going to do with the money. M: “What should we do with the money? I will hand it to my husband and he then buys fish, oil and vegetables.” I: “Won’t



you keep some for your own" M: "No, why should I?" I: "Well, you could buy something by yourself." (pause of thought) I: "Don't you go to the market (bazar) from time to time?" M: "No, I don't go. And if I go, it would be only in urgent cases (hortat)." G: "No we do not go to the market like Nurbanu or Rabbina. They habitually go to the bazar." M: "No, we don't go. We have shame (lojja ache). Those who don't have shame (lojja) are roaming on the market" (break) M: "While my husband is absent I go to the market. Where else should I get the vegetables? Who could go to the market? But I don't go regularly; I go inconspicuously (cup kore), buy and then return." (2011/11/23, Mojida, Golapi)

This segment of conversation shows that Mojida and Golapi reject the behaviour of Nurbanu and Rabbina. Implicitly they blame them for "not having shame" and thereby express their doubts about their moral attitude. Although Mojida goes to the market herself, she contrasts her behaviour with that of the other two women. To a certain extent this position can be assumed to be an attempt to appreciate one's own behaviour (lifestyle) and self-legitimation by defining the other. Their condemnation does not apply to spatial mobility in general, but questions its legitimacy in certain cases as here for Nurbanu and Rabbina. In this respect the increased spatial mobility does not necessarily result in negative implications for the status, but harbours the danger that the legitimacy of the behaviour is questioned, which would result in tremendous loss of status. This is the context in which one should position the fact that women avoid going to the market. Even though this action is not pre-dominantly condemned, rumours could spread and have significant effects. Some years ago, a woman was bitten by a rabid dog during the absence of her husband. Therefore, she had to go to the market daily to get an injection. The women reported that rumours spread as some men had noticed the frequent appearance of the woman, but were unaware of the reason. In this way one can interpret the performance of the female virtues by gestures and body language and the verbal vindications as a means to legitimise one's own spatial mobility.

Based on the literature (cf. Rozario 1992; White 1992) I previously assumed that it was especially the rich and upper middle-class people that condemned the appearance of women at the market place. Although this observation needs more data to be confirmed, it seems from my



findings that it was rather the relatively poor but socio-economically advancing families in Shundorpur that pronounced discomfort about observing women at the market. Moral objections were rarely expressed by members of wealthier households. Although the women of these households do not work in the field, do not go to the market and perform – especially in the presence of guests – explicit obedience, modesty, shyness and other ascribed female virtues, they do not condemn the behaviour of women from Gobeshonarpara, but legitimise it by way of their economic situation. In many of the statements by wealthier villagers, it is (implicitly) suggested that the poor do not have significant status in any case and acting reputably cannot be expected. In this way, they view the appearance of widows or poor women as normal and unavoidable considering the socio-economic realities. Accepting the poor women's low status as given, they reconfirm the social hierarchies that are to their own advantage, but do not condemn their behaviour. And some of the wealthier villagers state, "times have changed," and they assume the condemnation of women in public space is a backwards idea.

In fact it is not primarily the poor women who now go to the bazar, but pupils and students who have to pass the bazar to use certain facilities. Many wealthier women go to the market for "shopping," while the cloth for women from Gobeshonarpara is bought primarily by their husbands. Also the wealthier women display certain strategies of avoidance or self-legitimization. For example, the mother of the house I lived in always sent her son to the bazar to call an auto (local mean of transportation using electric charged battery) to come to her house. To do the shopping, she used the auto to get to the bazar about five kilometres away instead of buying at the close-by market. She wraps her sari carefully and wears a dupatta (scarf), which covers her hair fully. Young females of richer families often wear burkas or dupattas in the public. The status of a rich woman is not as much defined by her spatial mobility as by certain jobs (chakri).²¹ Education also implies an increased spatial mobility and can be a source of status advancement. Besides this, signs of religiosity in the language or clothing of the women can increase their prestige and the symbolic capital.

The positioning of wealthier families concerning spatial mobility can also be interpreted in another way: Absence of moral denunciation could also mean neglecting the willingness to fulfil financial responsibilities, which are socially expected. Thus, in order to avoid being blamed for



not offering the economic support to needy relatives or neighbours that would allow them to conform to gender norms, the spatial mobility of women is represented as a private matter that should be discussed within the family, e.g. "well, even if she goes to the market, why shouldn't she, as long as her husband allows it" (trader on the bazar, a. r.). This interpretation was also suggested by Shamoli and Shilpi who are relatives of the family with which I lived and who were sharecroppers on their land. The family I was staying with was known for being churlish and in the statements of these two women it appears that my family was not criticising them to avoid situations that would allude to their deficient family solidarity (2011/11/25).

8. Being unprotected

In the last part of the presentation of my empirical data I would like to turn to an aspect that was mentioned explicitly by many women as a disadvantage of the absence of their husband, i. e. perceived and structural aspects of insecurity and defencelessness. Without stating it explicitly, many of the mentioned fears are related to attacks or harassment by other men. Some women change their sleeping arrangements so that they do not have to sleep alone.²² But most statements about fears remain rather vague and in general. These complaints of being unprotected are not unreasonable feelings or culturally conditioned sensations, but have real manifestations also beyond aspects of sexual vulnerability, including lacking access to information and networks of social security (credits, contacts to political leaders or local elites, etc.). This is especially relevant for women who do not live near to a male relative and have no grown-up son. Choibul even mentioned worries about security as the cause for not migrating, as he does not want to leave his wife "unprotected" until his son is old enough to take this responsibility: "We do not have any relatives here (ekthane amader keu nai). What should I do in case anything happens to my wife or children?" (2011/10/21, a.r.).

Similarly many women describe the time of their husband's absence as a time of suffering, longing, and worry. Their fear also relates to the possibility of being left by their husband due to migration. They are afraid that their husbands get injured at work or in one of the many road accidents. But some, who have a husband regularly migrating to



the capital Dhaka or who have a disharmonious relationship, also fear being abandoned. As the absent men are less subject to control by the community, there are worries that the husband might find another wife and will direct emotional and financial support to her. Various statements imply an unquestionable assumption that women should live under the protection of men and under one roof with them. The following quote illustrates that even women who often complain about their husband and suffer because of them, articulate this assumption:

Rabbina complains about the unreliability of her husband. When he took the bus yesterday, he left nothing besides one mon dhan [37,2kg paddy] and one kilogram dried fish. Now she has to earn money herself to buy some food. Also her youngest urgently needs some cloth as it is getting cold. She will have to buy it from her own money at the hat, where cloth is cheaper. But she said, when her husband is coming back, he will scold and beat her. He will yell at her and ask her where the cloth is coming from and why she bought new one. That is how he is. She cannot keep any money for savings. She said that it is different for Shoripa and Nurbanu: "Their husbands do not take their money – they do not want the money of women. You know, they go to the bazar and buy betelnuts and cloth ...". I ask her whether she is happy to be without her husband as she cannot rely on him anyway. She says "How can I be happy, when my husband leaves and I stay behind alone? If one has to work the whole day hard (koshto kore), then you do feel bad, don't you? How can I be happy, when he leaves me behind unprotected, when I am alone?" (2011/11/22, Rabbina)

Narrations of living in fear and longing are also the topic of various songs (gan). It can be assumed that these feelings are on the one hand socially expected, but on the other hand mirror the vulnerable situations with which the women have to cope during the absence of their husbands.



9. Transforming gender relations?

My observations concerning the spatial mobility of women contrast with the study of Rozario in which it was principally the dominant group that reinsured the restriction of women's mobility, revitalised gender norms, and established corresponding discourses.²³ Therefore, she emphasised the control by men and community (shomaj). However, in my study, despite weak or potentially condemning discourse, avoidance of male dominated space is conceptualised as an independent decision or "fear" was observable. There are many indications that the mobility of women is currently not as politicised, and therefore, not discursively disputed or controlled. That does not mean that means of domination and control as defined by Bourdieu are not relevant, but rather they manifest in a more subtle form.

Also porda, purity and honour remain important categories albeit with different meanings ascribed. While Rozario associates porda directly with restrictions of spatial mobility, which she equals with the control of female sexuality, interpretations of porda in Shundorpur turn out to more heterogeneous. Although sexual purity and modesty remain important, they are not considered to be expressed by the absence of women in public sphere. Rather it is assumed as an inner endeavour of the women, which is expressed through her clothing and behaviour.²⁴ As Cohen has pointed out, "the sharing of symbol is not necessarily the same as the sharing of meaning" (1985: 16). In this way porda is generally a shared symbol and ideal, but different meanings are ascribed to it by individuals and competing interpretations can be found without creating conflict in which the meaning would need to be negotiated. It seems that new meanings that emerged over time added to, rather than replaced, older interpretations, which could be remobilized in the case of conflicts.

Additionally, I have shown that there are different evaluation standards and systems of status achievement that work parallel to each other. In this way some (rather wealthy) people in Shundorpur have reflected on the contradiction between the cultural ideology of spatial segregation between men and women and the actual practices and also questioned cultural ideas with regard to the economical circumstances. Thereby they mitigate the scope to use the restriction of female mobility as symbolic capital, although aspects of power and domination remain. It seems that the relation of class, status and spatial mobility in



Shundorpur is more complex than assumed for Doria by Rozario and a clear linear relationship is not visible. As far as the mobility of the woman is considered legitimate, it does not endanger her status.

During the absence of their husbands many women frequent the market. In the perspective of the applied framework, this should not be considered as a transformation of social structures or gender roles, but rather as a temporally legitimised solution. As the women, through their behaviour, body language and appearance, reinforce dominance of men in this gendered space, the increased mobility of women must not be interpreted as a rupture in social practices but can also be seen as a form of continuity.

In this study I explored, based on selected aspects, the question of how women's situations change during the temporal absence of their husbands and whether this leads to a transformation of gender relations. This case study is located in a more general discussion of migration and social change. While I focused on the spatial mobility, other aspects such as cooperation and relations between women, access to work and income, different consequences for temporary and permanent female-headed households, decision-making negotiations between men and women, or the perspectives of men are worthy of further investigation. Long-term studies are necessary to further explore the relationship between migration, spatial mobility and the impact of social practices on cultural ideals and gender roles.

Endnotes

- 1 I have tried to transcribe the Bengali words with Latin letters in a way that also readers unfamiliar with Bengali can grasp the pronunciation.
- 2 In English also 'purdah' or 'pardah', lit.: curtain, veil. The term is related to gender specific norms of behaviour and will be explained in detail later in the text.
- 3 The term shall be henceforth put in inverted commas to indicate the extremely problematic use of 'Western', which does not necessarily describe a geographical unit. It rather refers to a constantly changing concept, used in communication. The term 'Western' is also used to refer to phenomena and patterns of

communication or organisation, which cannot be localised within geographical or national borders. Although terms such as hegemonic „world culture“ („Weltkultur“ cf.: Holzer 2006) or „world polity“ (Meyer 1980) might be more adequate, they are often perceived as 'Western'.

- 4 Very pronounced in Shanaj Parveen, chapter 2.4 "Cultural Barriers in Women's Life": "Purdah is a common custom and tradition in the predominantly Islamic society like Bangladesh, which puts difficult hurdles on the path of women's advancement" (2005: 40f, emphasis in original).
- 5 It should be noted that meanings of the term 'secular' are diverse. In Bengali the term *dharmo niropekkhota*, which could also be translated with "religious neutrality", is mainly used. In this way the term 'secular' is rather used as in the sense of a separation between state and religion and not as diminished importance of religion. Secularism was one of the basic principles of the first constitution after the independence from Pakistan, but was abandoned already in 1977 and instead "absolute faith and trust in the Allah Almighty" was inserted (Ahamed & Nazneen 1990: 796).
- 6 Thus Naher argues against interpretations that reduce attacks of so-called fundamentalist groups to an incommensurateness of religious with modern ideas and values. But also her interpretation of the anti-NGO-campaign in the 1990s as resistance against NGOs as "agents of Western Imperialism" (2005: 207) is not unproblematic.
- 7 The diversity of movements cannot be summarised fully here due to space limitations. They range from claims for reform and a deep criticism of cultural practices such as sati (widow-burning) and early marriages in order to achieve progress and modernity (a position held by representatives of the Bengal Renaissance and the Brahmo Samaj, cf. Murshid 1983) to positions that assumed adaption of 'Western' behaviour and moral degradation as the source of the social ills and therefore advocate a return to morally advanced values and rules of Islam (e.g. "Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam" by Syed Abul Ala Maududi). In addition, it should be noted, that the "women's movement" was lead and promoted in South Asia until the 20th century mainly by elite Hindu men (bhadralok). Ghulam Murshid writes "English educated Bengali men exposed



their women to the process of modernization” (1983: 5) and in this sense was the “movement for the ‘emancipation’ of Bengali women [...] not a movement for ‘liberating’ women from the authority of men. On the contrary, men started the movement as part of modernizing their own world” (ibid.: 199). The religious division was paralleled by legal regulations by the colonial government (Shehabuddin 2008: 35-37).

- 8 The proportion of households lead by women should not be underestimated. A study initiated by UNFPA estimates that 15 percent of the households in rural Bangladesh are female-headed (Mannan 2000). According to the BBS it was 11.5 percent in 2007 (2009: 3). Most women heading households are widows, but others are abandoned, divorced or separate living women. It can be assumed that the proportion of households temporally headed by women is much higher.
- 9 In contrast to men, for whom economic capital, especially land, is more important. This context is often used to explain why many Muslim women relinquish the legal claims for their part of the inheritance in favour of their brothers. It has been argued that they reinvest this economic capital into social networks and the security that a good relation to their brothers offers (e.g. Cain, Khanam & Nahar 1979: 408).
- 10 Inden & Nicholas (1977) following David Schneider (1968) have argued that the transference of English terms to Bangladesh does not enhance the understanding of kinship construction. In accordance to this position, I use mainly Bengali terms. For more elaborated discussions of group and kinship constructions see: Aziz 1979, Inden & Nicholas 1977 and Kotalová 1993.
- 11 While upper class Hindus were giving dowry (dabi, joutuk), in the past Muslims and Christians were rather practicing pon. The exact time of this change is contested. It can be assumed that there are according to class as well as regional differences. Rozario assumes that the change accelerated during the economic transformations after independence war in the 1970s (1992: 134) and Kabeer estimates that it began already in the 1950s (2001: 60). In my research region I found only two old couples at whose marriage not dabi, but pon was paid.
- 12 All names and names of places have been changed.
- 13 By estimation of Shundorpur inhabitants about 30 percent of the



people in the village earn their income primarily from cultivating their land, 40 percent of the agriculture land is tenured land and around 30 percent have no own land (besides the ground of their house). According to the census in 2001, the "main source of income" in the district Nilphamari (including Nilphamari city) was "Cultivation/Livestock/Forestry" for 35,79 percent, "Agricultural Labour" for 32,03 percent, "business" for 11,43 percent and "employment" for 5,93 percent. BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics). 2001. *Nilpharmari Zila at a Glance*, p. ix, <http://www.bbs.gov.bd/WebTestApplication/userfiles/Image/Wing/Census%20Wing/Zila%20Series/nilphamari.pdf> [retrieved 17.02.2012]. However, many statistics are misleading as in many cases various categories apply as a landowner might work as a day labour or tenure additional land.

- 14 Seasonal and other forms of internal or national migration can be found in all regions of Bangladesh and have different causes. Patterns and intensity differ according to agricultural conditions and land distribution. An overview is given in Mahbub 1986. For a historical discussion of seasonal migration of peasants and economic reforms during the colonial period see: Faraizi 1993.
- 15 It should be noted that many statements concerning the economic situation were marked by misinformation or underestimations. Only in the end of my study I was able to differentiate the economic capabilities of the households, but uncertainty remains. The usage of the term 'household' in Bangladesh is problematic as it often remains unclear whether it refers to bari or ghor. Memberships in communities that live or eat together can be temporal, and intensive economic cooperation also takes places outside of it. In this work 'household' is equated with ghor and therefore households without an own income also appear in my statistics.
- 16 Of course, there are also other male spaces that imply a clear spatial separation between men and women as e.g. the mosque. Further activities such as visits to the baper bari (father's house) require a high degree of spatial mobility that is assumed to be legitimate.
- 17 It should be shortly pointed out that the gendered space is paralleled by different patterns of consumption. According to the men and women of Gobeshonarpara, men spend 15-30 percent



of their income on personal consumption (cigarettes, snacks, tea, gambling, betelnuts) at the market, while about 50-60 percent of the family income is spent on family meals. Also in families where both, husband and wife have an income the personal spending of the men is substantially higher. Many women told me "What should I do at the market? I don't have any money, I couldn't buy anything."

- 18 As a consequence of this gendered usage of the market, women are at least partially excluded from politics, as a quote of a member (of the local administration/government) illustrates:
M: "There are seven members and one chairman [...]" after a while he added "well, and then there are additionally three mohila (female) members" [on legally reserved posts for women], I: "Could a woman also be elected as a [general] member?" M: "They could, but nobody would vote for them. A woman cannot attend the meetings in the evening. How then can the women represent anybody's interest?" (2011/11/21, at a tea store, present: member, I and Doskina, a.r.)
- 19 The abbreviation "a.r." means "analogous reproduction". All quotes given in the text are rough translations of talks or interviews that have been noted down as soon as possible afterwards. The date is indicated in the following style: year/month/day.
- 20 Aside from Bourdieu's definition, more extensive explanations to be found in different works, as "Systeme dauerhafter Dispositionen, strukturierende Strukturen, die geeignet sind, (...) als Erzeugungs- und Strukturierungsprinzip von Praxisformen und Repräsentationen, die objektiv 'geregelt' und 'regelmäßig' sein können, ohne im geringsten das Resultat einer gehorsamen Erfüllung von Regel zu sein" (Bourdieu 2009: 165).
- 21 While it is generally assumed to be status degrading for women to work as a day labourer (kaj), it is rather prestigious to get an employment post (chakri). Families often do have to pay a lower dowry or no dowry at all, when the woman has a job such as a teacher etc.
- 22 This fear is also related to real experiences. Asked the question when the last bicar or shalish (community hearing) involving their para took place, some women (Doskina, Shilpi, Goleneur) answered, that it was about three years ago after an attempted rape. While the husband of Merina was working in Bogra one night



Mojid, the husband of Hanufa, went into her house. Merina was afraid and started screaming. Awaken by that screaming other men and women came to her house. They held him captive and called the chairman. After the husband returned his punishment was ruled: 100 lashings, a public apology and a reabsorbing of his own spit from the floor (2011/11/25).

- 23 I would like to point to the fact that the discrepancy between my research findings and Rozario's can have causes such as regional differences, the context of the study and especially the difference in temporal context. While Rozario published her study in 1992, she conducted field research from December 1982 to April 1984 that is nearly 30 years before my research.
- 24 Similar results emerged from studies in the textile industry in the 1980s that showed that female workers countered the dominant discourse, which condemned their presence in the public sphere, by introducing alternative interpretations (Feldman & McCarty 1983; Kabeer 2001). In this context the concept *porda* did not lose its relevance, but a plurality of meanings ascribed to the concept were used to (de-)legitimise their own or the behaviour of others (Kabeer 2001: 82-141).

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